



ST2 Fic — Life Beginning by Owlsarecool1999

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Adventure, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Pairings: Eleven/Jane H./Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-20 11:17:26

Updated: 2017-12-09 00:45:37

Packaged: 2019-12-17 03:03:09

Rating: T

Chapters: 8

Words: 19,072

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: This follows the ST2 series with El beginning school (8th grade) in September of '85. Navigating life, uncertainty and the nonsense of middle school. Feel free to ask for one-shots if anything interests you in these chapters. Would love to hear from you!

1. Chapter 1: August 31, 1985

Chapter 1: August 31, 1985 Back to School Shopping

"Okaaa-ay, let's see, we've got #2 pencils, two-pocket folders, spiral notebooks, eraser, calculator, uuuuhh." Hopper paused squinting at the list in the middle of the school supply aisle at Hawkin's General store. "Kleenex? What the hell do you need Kleenex for?"

El's eyes scanned the supplies lining the shelves taking it all in. Pencil pouches and binders and notebooks, and glitter pens —she'd never seen anything like it. Over Hopper's grumbles and groans surveying the list, she had excitedly placed each item in the basket.

"She needs a lunchbox," Mike rounded the corner holding up five different hard plastic and soft vinyl lunch boxes. "Which one do you like, El?" El's eyes lit up as she hurried over to Mike touching each one with her hand; a Star Wars one with Luke and Leia hunched and ready for battle, a comic book one, an ET one, one with horses and sparkles and rainbows, and a plain green and white striped one.

"Kid, she doesn't need a—," Hopper groaned as El deftly placed the Star Wars lunchbox into the basket against Hopper's protest. Mike beamed and hurried back around to the other aisle to return the other lunch boxes. El turned back to the school supply aisle scanning the contents carefully, taking everything in slowly.

This wasn't her first foray out into the main town of Hawkins. Over the summer, Hopper had slowly but surely let her wander farther and farther from the double-wide on the lake. They had moved back into the double-wide at the beginning of the summer. Baby steps, Hopper had called them. Testing the waters, he'd said under his breath as they unpacked the minimal boxes they brought back from the cabin. The rest of the summer was spent decorating El's room, making the double-wide more homey and warm with hand-drawn pictures courtesy of the party (mainly Will). New rugs and blankets adorned most surfaces while picture frames were scattered around every part of the house. They were slowly filled with familiar faces; faces of the party crowded around the gaming table in the Wheeler's basement; Joyce and Jonathan beaming in their backyard while tilling their new

garden; Will and El laughing at the Hawkins carnival with popcorn shared between them; Mike and El wedged close on the ferris wheel (Joyce had bullied her way onto the platform in front of them, snapping a quick picture with Jonathan's Canon before being ushered away by the irritable carney); Hopper standing behind El with his hands on her shoulders, her hands reaching up to cover his and smiling broadly up at him; Steve, with a mouth full of pizza with Dustin laughing and pointing beside him while Steve unsuccessfully reaches for the camera snapping the shot; El and Max holding sparklers on the fourth of July, wide and mischievous grins on their faces; Lucas steadying El on his bike as she pushes the first pedal down uncertainly with Mike just off to the side with his hands deep in his pockets and a downturned frown of worry on his face.

Memories of their first real summer together.

And now, it was the first day of 8th grade tomorrow and El was being allowed to start with the rest of the party despite the one year warning from Dr. Owens. Mike had been the volleying cry in that discussion: "That's so stupid! She'd start in January then, that's already halfway through the year! She'll make more of a scene showing up halfway through than just starting with the rest of us anyway!"

Hopper couldn't deny that logic, but he had still been restrictive with curfews and rules when entering school:

1. Stick with the party when at all possible. Never be left alone.
2. Hopper would drive her to and from school—no biking.
3. No afterschool activities until next year, that meant no AV club with the boys.
4. When at school and out in public, it's always Jane, never El and definitely never Eleven.
5. At least for the fall, if anything fishy starts happening, she'd be yanked from school right away.

El had listened to these with a narrowed gaze across from the kitchen

table, much like she had listened in the cabin to the Not Stupid rules after Hopper found her. She tried negotiating some of the terms: But what about the arcade? Or if I want to do with homework with Mike after school?

"We'll see, but for now, these are the rules. If you can't follow them then we'll have to revisit the option for school. Got it?" He tapped a finger lightly on the page with the written rules. She nodded, her gaze softening as she reread them in her head.

"Okay, last but not least, a backpack. Hey, kid you got any old backpacks El could use?" Hopper glanced around the list at Mike who was having El choose what binder she wanted. They were discussing the merits of a plain colored one that she could decorate herself versus one covered in stars and glitter.

"She needs to pick her own backpack. It's half the fun of actually school supply shopping. Come on, El, I'll show you where they are." He grabbed her hand softly and she slid the sparkly starred binder into the basket giving Hopper a reassuring look. Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled sharply. He knew having Mike come to help pick out stuff was going to cost him.

He rounded the corner and watched as Mike helped El try on a backpack that was pastel tie-dyed with greens, blues, pinks, and yellows. She beamed, nodding her head emphatically at Mike when he asked if she liked it. He knew she would.

A smile stretched over Hopper's face, "Looks good kid." El was buzzing with excitement. They carried their purchases to the counter and Joyce clasped her hands in delight as she rang them out, tacking on her family discount, and commenting on the beautiful backpack and her Star Wars lunch box ("Great choice!"). Hopper mouthed a quiet 'thank you' to Joyce before leaning his back against the door and pushing it, holding it open as Mike, laden down with bags, and El gripping her new backpack, slipped through and piled into the chief's truck.

Back at the double wide, El spread all of her school supplies out on her bed. Mike perched at the head of her bed, sharpening her pencils and dropping them into her pencil bag chattering away about school

assemblies, the cafeteria, and the best way to get to the AV room without being spotted by mouthbreathers. She kneeled in front of her bed, listening carefully and pulling out singular sheets of loose leaf paper, laying them one by one into her binder. Mike grinned, watching her:

"You excited?"

"Very much." El nodded keeping her eyes glued on centering each of the papers holes over the rings before sliding it on.

"You're going to do great. With all the practice we've been doing. They're going to love you. It will finally feel real, having you there."

"I think so too." She breathed out happily glancing at Mike. He hadn't looked away from her since he started talking. Her breath caught in her throat and he smiled lopsidedly before resuming his sharpening task.

Hopper knocked on the open bedroom door, leaning in the doorframe: "30-minute warning Wheeler, then we got to take you home. It's a school night."

El's lips twitched into an ecstatic smile. Not once had that excuse been levied at her and now, she was like the rest of them. She wouldn't just have to hear their stories from afar about the gossip factory that was Hawkins Middle, she'd actually be there, in the thick of it, holding onto Mike's hand and navigating those halls, clutching her textbooks, and actually feeling 13.

That's what it would be like, she was certain.

2. Chapter 2: September 1, 1985

Chapter 2: September 1, 1985 First Day of Hawkins Middle

El's eyes shot open that morning at 7am. She rushed out of her room and into the kitchen where Hopper was groggily cooking eggs and bacon, a cigarette clenched between his lips humming along to the Jim Crow vinyl he had playing softly in the background.

El bounded into the kitchen and whipped open the freezer grabbing a box of eggos. It should be noted that the majority of the freezer was filled, overflowing rather, with boxes of eggos and a few TV dinners. She pulled two frozen eggos from the open box and popped them into the toaster, staring into the slots as they glowed red and orange.

"Hey kid, I was making—," Hopper protested before the eggos popped up from the toaster and El juggled them hotly between her hands.

At the Wheeler's, Mike was hovering over the toaster too, plate ready as Mrs. Wheeler packed his lunch chirping about how exciting the first day of 8th grade was going to be, how she couldn't believe, and how she was so proud, so proud! Mike tapped his fingers impatiently. He wanted to bike to school early so he would for sure be there when El arrived. He wasn't taking any chances with Hopper's new school rules. Who knows what he would do if he didn't see any of the party there waiting to receive El. He might just take El back home and lock her away until January.

Once the eggos popped, he yanked them from the toaster, swearing a little too loudly.

"Michael!" Mrs. Wheeler closed her eyes as if in pain from the shock of those words.

"Sorry! It's just hot, jeez." He walked the plate to the kitchen table and proceeded to eat as fast as humanly possible and downed his orange juice in three hefty gulps.

"Slow down son, you don't want to call the play before it's even started," Mr. Wheeler droned unenthusiastically. Mike rolled his eyes

and rushed his plate and cup to the sink.

"I promised I'd meet the party early before school started. We're hammering out details for the AV club schedule." It was almost too easy to lie to his parents now, but for some reason it didn't ever make him feel that bad.

"Okay! But just let me get a picture before you go!" Mrs. Wheeler begged as she dug in the kitchen drawer for their camera.

"Mom NO!" Mike scurried to the front door cramming his feet into his sneakers and slinging his backpack over his blue and red striped t-shirt. The summer heat wouldn't wear off until late October.

"Michael Wheeler, WAIT!" He could hear her clicking down the hallway. He ripped open the front door and crashed into the garage pulling his bike free and throwing a leg over just as she reached the front door.

"Sorry Mom I have to go!" He shot off down the street. Mrs. Wheeler, exasperated, lifted the camera and snapped a shot of his retreating figure down the street. Her eyes suddenly went wide: "Michael! Your lunch!" But he was already around the bend and out of their cul-de-sac.

"Okay you ready? One, two, three—cheeeee-eese!" Hopper hunched over, awkwardly holding the camera between his thick fingers, the shutter closing with a crash over El's glittering grin.

"Cheese!" she was positively oozing happiness and excitement.

After breakfast, she spent most of her morning packing and then repacking her backpack. She chose her favorite outfit: tattered bell-bottomed jeans, her new white converse (a special splurge from Hopper), a light green t-shirt with white lining along the sleeves and neckline, with a black, long-sleeve plaid tied around her waist. She'd carefully combed through her curls, making sure not to pull them apart too much and make them frizzy. She tied the orange and yellow friendship bracelet Max had made her that summer next to the blue hair band from Hopper. On her opposite wrist, she carefully tied the bracelet Mike had made her: dark blue, light grey, forest green with a

heart charm embedded at the center. Lucas had suggested that she bring a picture to hang in her locker to help decorate it, so she chose her favorites from her amassed pile of film laying scattered in her desk drawer: A group picture of the whole party standing in front of the arcade, arms slung lazily over each others shoulders, mouths open and laughing; Max and El sitting on the sidewalk in shorts and sandals, too-big sunglasses eclipsing their face as they distractedly sucked on bright red popsicles; and lastly, she and Mike caught with bright smiles, faces so close together that their cheeks were touching, their curls mingling with one another's.

She zipped her backpack after carefully placing the photos inside of a notebook.

Now, face close to the window in Hopper's truck, she bounced with excitement as the school came into view. "Here we go." Hopper whispered under his breath. She glanced over and gave him a reassuring smile.

Buses had started arriving with children pouring from them and crowding the green space in front of the school. Kids were embracing and shouting at friends across the lawn, re-animating friendships forgotten from the summer. El scanned the open area for the bike racks where Mike told her they'd meet her. Sure enough, most of the party had parked their bikes and were laughing and prodding one another, waiting just for her. Mike's face surveyed the drop-off line for a sign of Hopper's truck. Finally he spotted it and waved frantically.

"She's here!" he yelled over his shoulder to everyone. El was practically leaping from the front seat, grabbing her lunch box and being pulled back to lean over the seat for some last parting words from Hopper: "Remember the rules." He warned her. She nodded and shut the door halfway through a chide of "Be SAFE!" Pulling the straps across her shoulders she started walking down the path toward the bike racks, making a beeline for Mike. She was buffeted by the crowd of distracted, excited children. Girls and boys bumped into and shouldered her making direct paths to friends. A boy unexpectedly yelled across her face, startling her, as he tried to hail a friend. Mike pursed his lips and jogged forward to meet her halfway. He linked his arm through hers and pulled her along, navigating and dodging

through the throng of middle schoolers.

"You okay?" he asked checking for signs of concern on her face. El recovered quickly, smiling enjoying the feeling of Mike's arm looped through hers. She tightened her grip a little and Mike smiled reassuringly.

"El! You made it! Welcome to Hawkins Middle, or as I like to affectionately title it 'The Hellscape that is my Current existence.' Assholes. As far as the eye can see!" Dustin held out an arm and waved it across him indicating the lawn of kids. Rule #4 already broken. Lucas hissed and punched Dustin:

"It's JANE, dumbASS," he reminded, putting extra emphasis on the 'ass'. Dustin cursed an apology and looked around to make sure no one had heard.

"It's not that bad." Max retorted, just arriving and kicking her skateboard up into her hand.

"Speak for yourself," Will lamented as a group of boys walked past throwing out a new variety of insults they had perfected over the summer months.

"Come on, let's get to our lockers. You all have English first period with Sanders, yeah?" Mike reached for El's lunch box and started guiding the party toward the main double doors leading down the main drag of Hawkins Middle, flanked on either side with lockers muted in color.

Mike had scoped out the location and proximity of his locker to El's one summer day when the boys had snuck into Hawkin's middle to use the Heathkit. He walked her to her locker and showed her how to unlock it with the combination. She watched intently and then when the locker popped open she could hardly contain her squeal of delight. Mike let out a soft laugh, so happy to see her getting to just be a kid like the rest of them and experiencing all of it for the first time with him. He put her lunch box in the empty space.

"You can put notebooks that you don't need right away for your next class in there and your text books and stuff."

"Oh! I brought these. Mike hold this." She yanked off her backpack and placed it in Mike's extended palms, unzipping and pulling out the pictures. She gently shoved each one into the metal sides of the locker door, Mike reaching just over her head to secure them a little more in place when they slipped some. She stood back and smiled.

"Looks nice!" Mike beamed, his eyes resting on the picture of the two of them. El turned back to him and proceeded to unload some of the contents of her backpack. When the first bell rang, El jumped at the sound. She slammed her locker door shut and Mike helped her to get her backpack on. The rest of the party scurried over.

"Wait here, I'm just going to run to my locker really quick." His hand left El's arm and slid down across her hand as he took off jogging down the length of the hall. She could just see him over the crowd of bobbing heads, quickly fumbling with his locker—he was taller than most of the middle schoolers she noticed. Lucas wasn't far behind him in height though.

"Mike HURRY UP WE'RE GOING TO BE LATE AND I'M NOT GOING TO GET A TARDY BECAUSE YOU HAVE AWFUL TIME MANAGEMENT" Dustin screamed over the crowd. They gave him cringing looks as they walked past. He followed a couple of aghast passing faces with a grin saying, "Hi, Nice to see yah, welcome back, this is my hell."

Mike rushed back, sliding to a halt into El's side and wrapping an arm expertly around her waist.

"K. Let's jet." He pulled her along through the crowd. The party walked in front, forming almost a shield that forced the other kids to walk around the couple behind them. El glanced up a couple of times at Mike's face as he volleyed in and out of conversation with the party ahead of them. She didn't want to mention the rising butterflies in her stomach that she could only expect as nervousness. Mike's hand felt nice though, lightly gripping her waist, his thumb moving up and down sporadically, almost in a response to her nervous energy.

They crossed the threshold into their English class as Mr. Sanders wrote the class title and his name on the blackboard. Piling into an

array of desks surrounding one another—Max sitting on El's left, Mike in front of her, Lucas behind, Will to her right and Dustin in front of Max—they pulled out notebooks and chattered until the final bell rang and Mr. Sanders turned on cue:

"Alright, alright! Settle down. Settle down. And welcome back. I hope your summers were exceptionally literary. I'm sure you spent it reading and pondering the meaning of life amongst the pages of such visionaries like Thoreau, Shelley, and my personal favorite, Mr. Steven King. Now this is..." As he continued his opening speech, El stared expectantly at the blackboard, eyes trained to Mr. Sanders, attempting to catch anything meaningful. She hastily jotted down the names of authors he named just to be writing something. Her whole body tensed, pulled over her desk, at the ready. Just as Mr. Sanders was beginning to write the syllabus on the board for their first assignment, a small folded piece of paper fell onto her desk.

Mike had dropped it quickly over his shoulder. The front of the folded paper was scrawled with a messy 'El' on it. She glanced up at the blackboard, quietly unfolding it and reading the contents:

'Hi. Just wanted to say, you look great today. And you're going to do great. Love Mike'

The 'love' was hastily scratched out though, but not erased. She smiled and tucked the note into her notebook and started to quickly take notes from the blackboard, letting her muscles relax a little bit and ease back into her chair, releasing her sharp grip on her pencil.

3. Chapter 3: September 1point5, 1985

Chapter 3: September 1.5, 1985 Lunch at Hawkins Middle

First through third period passed by in a whirl. After English, they'd shuffled back and forth down the hall to social studies and then math. The only minor hiccup so far was when Mrs. Wentworth had taken role at the beginning of second period.

"Jane Hopper." She rang out, eyes peering over her silver frames. El was lost in thought looking at the book cover of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the first book Mr. Sanders had slotted them to read that month. She ran a hand over the shadowy figure of a bird perched on a branch and wondered why Mr. Sanders was having them read a book about killing birds.

"Jane HOPPER." Mrs. Wentworth repeated. Mike, sitting next to her this time, reached across and nudged her.

"El, that's you!" he whispered.

El's eyes bolted from Mike to Mrs. Wentworth. She raised her hand tentatively and with a short, sharp "Here!" Mrs. Wentworth nodded and marked her down. A titter of laughter erupted around El. Some girls toward the back of the class were leaning over and whispering. El absently looked over her shoulder and made eye contact with a blonde haired, blue eyed girl who grimaced at her. She turned back around, glancing at Mike who smiled back at her and mouthed 'It's okay!'

After Social Studies, they stopped at El's locker rejoining with the rest of the group before heading to Math. El hesitantly stowed the Harper Lee novel in her locker. This time, Max took her arm, pulling her ahead of the party much to Mike's chagrin.

"Sooo. How's the first day going?" Max inquired, secretly chomping on a piece of gum. El watched the way her mouth opened and closed for a minute, the faint minty smell washing over her. She decided not to mention the girls laughing. It hadn't been that bad.

"Good so far. I'm glad I have classes with everyone and Mike. It's a lot to remember though." El was having a great day so far, but first days were also overwhelming.

"Dude, I know. But don't worry, it gets easier. What do you have after third period?" Max squinted trying to remember (the party had made sure to memorize El's schedule in addition to their own as a precaution. Mike had asked them to, just in case anyone got separated from El). El withdrew her schedule from her pocket.

"Biology with Mr. Clark" she replied, looking over at Max who nodded in sudden realization.

"That's with me! Hell yeah!" Dustin reached between Max and El's shoulders to high five with El. She slapped his hand with a wide smile.

When Math began and they were distributed their textbooks El flipped through it quickly. Dustin had assumed this might be the hardest subject for El, since it was for most anyone. But Mike had quickly responded with: "You don't know that, she's smart! She might be really good at it without even trying." Always quick to defend that Wheeler.

Miss Shelby was a new math teacher this year at Hawkins Middle. She was young, bright-eyed and enthusiastic. She welcomed them in with a clap of her hands and had them each introduce themselves while she ticked them off on her role call sheet. This time, El didn't hesitate. After Max, she sat up straight in her chair and with a bright smile announced, "Jane Hopper!"

"Nice to meet you Jane." Miss Shelby smiled back and marked her down. After role, Miss Shelby set them the task of doing a practice quiz. After the audible groans (and an excited gasp from Mike and Lucas), she passed out the papers. El leaned over and began.

Math was hard, but she enjoyed taking the pieces apart in each problem, the way Mike and Lucas and even Dustin had showed her on different occasions during their tutoring sessions. She parsed out each problem methodically, her breath evening out, her mind relaxing and thinking quickly. She enjoyed the sound of her pencil

softly scratching across the page, the shuffle of feet, the quiet humming breaths of her classmates around her. She glanced over at Mike after finishing a particularly taxing problem. His eyes were trained to his quiz, focused and excited, his pencil flying across the page. He was almost finished.

She allowed a quick smile to flash across her face before setting back to work. Mike was the first one to stand up and return his paper to Miss Shelby. Slowly, more and more students filed up to turn in their papers. Eleven was one of the last three students to slip from her chair and hand her paper in, but she did so with a satisfied smile and even breathed a 'Thank you' to Miss Shelby before returning to her seat. Dustin gave her the thumbs up and Lucas slipped her low high five. Mike beamed proudly.

After third period, the party split up. El was confused for a minute.

"Wait, Mike, you're not coming to biology?" She asked as Dustin tried to tug her off down a side hallway.

"No, I have biology during sixth period with Lucas and Will, remember? You're just going to be with Dustin for this class but I'll see you for lunch. I'll meet you right by your locker after okay?" His hand was clasped around the wrist that wore the bracelet he'd made her. His thumb absently outlined the heart there. El nodded an affirmation.

"Right...I-I just forgot," she said shaking her head and looking down. The nervous butterflies returning to her stomach. Classes had felt easy and swift with Mike and the rest of the party around her, but she had forgotten that it was impossible to have every single class together.

"Hey, I'll see you in an hour okay?" He pulled her into a quick hug, running a thumb across her cheek before nodding toward Dustin.

"Have fun!" He said to both of them before turning and running off to join the rest of the group. El turned and linked arms with Dustin who grinned from ear to ear.

"Biology is so awesome, you're not even going to believe what we're

going to do this year! Mr. Clark told me everything over the summer...dissections, experiments, crazy health videos, shit we've never seen before —," as comforting as Dustin's voice was, El looked over her shoulder back down the hallway where Mike had gone. She could just see him about to turn a corner. Just as he was about to slip from her view, he turned around and caught her stare and started waving wildly at her with a huge eager grin. She couldn't help but laugh a little.

"What?" Dustin asked, looking over his shoulder, but Mike had gone.

"Nothing," El smirked, "Dustin what did you mean by 'dissection'?" El's eyes looked worried, her face tilting forward toward the ground trying to sound the syllables out exactly as he had said them. Dustin's eyes widened in that way when curiosity overcame him.

"Oh man, just wait. It's brutal but seriously awesome."

He pulled her through the door to biology room. "My lord." He called toward Mr. Clark.

"Dustin," Mr. Clark called back in affirmation. "Oh, welcome Jane! It's so nice to see you again. We're so glad to have you with us at Hawkins Middle. Let me know if you have any outstanding questions, I'd be happy to answer them as I'm sure Dustin has let you know." Mr. Clark's eyes twinkled affectionately. El wasn't sure if he recognized her as Mike's blonde-haired cousin from a couple of years ago or not. If he had, he never let on. He simply accepted the story of Jane Hopper, the chief's daughter from a wayward affair resurfacing after tragic circumstances. Mr. Clark was already her favorite. The boys only spoke about him in the kindest terms and he was a key figure in providing the textbooks she had needed to help tutor and get her up to speed for this year. She was truly grateful.

She nodded at him and made her way to the black two-person lab table that Dustin sat at. When Mr. Clark turned on the projector after welcoming the class back from Summer break and clicked onto the first slide of a flayed toad with diagrammed body parts, she heard an excited Dustin whisper:

"Oh NICE!" El's furious note taking recommenced.

After the bell signaling the end of fourth period, El shoved her notebook and new biology textbook into her backpack. She jumped from her chair and nearly sprinted toward the door, pausing to mention a thanks to Mr. Clark before leaving.

"HEY! WAIT UP!" Dustin called, furiously trying to stuff all of his papers into his backpack. El loved biology, but it was by far the hardest class to take notes in. For one thing, she kept finding herself glancing around looking for Mike. She had to keep reminding herself that this and sixth period were the only two classes they didn't have together. Dustin had poked her more than once during the hour to refocus her attention.

For another thing, Mr. Clark seemed to say so many important things it was hard to capture everything he'd said in her notes. A few times El had glanced over, exasperated, at Dustin's notes only to see that he wasn't really taking any. He was staring in awe at the slides. She'd have to get better at taking notes quickly since Dustin wasn't going to be any help in that department.

El rounded a corner too quickly, walking fast but not quite running toward her locker. Her curls bounced and her eyes were wide as she struggled to remember the route back to her locker. Finally, she saw the rest of the party huddled around her locker. She leaned forward a little and quickened her pace, skidding to a halt next to Mike. He received her brightly with:

"Hey! There you are! How was biology?" He handed her her lunch box after opening the locker for her. She reached in and switched out some books for her fifth period class that she'd needed. "Wait, where's Dustin?" Mike asked a frown coming to his face.

Mike peered over El's shoulder and she turned her head just in time to see a frantic Dustin sprinting down the hall.

"OUT OF THE WAY OUT OF THE WAY!" he yelled, taking fitful breaths. When he stopped in front of them, he buckled over, hands on his knees catching his breath.

"Dustin, what the hell?" Lucas shot at him, annoyed. "You broke Rule #1 too!?"

Dustin held up a finger in front of him, pulling in breaths before leaning up, a pained look on his face.

"Mike...[breath]...your girlfriend...[breath]...needs to slow down.. [breath]." At this Mike blushed. The topic of girlfriend/boyfriend had yet to be broached between he and El.

"She doesn't run at the speed of light Dustin, I think you can keep up." Max shot back.

"She just TOOK OFF OKAY?! I TRIED." Dustin slowly regained his breath and threw his hands up over his head, "Jesus."

"It's okay just..." Mike turned to El, "You have to stay with a party member at all times, remember Jane?" The name didn't roll off of his tongue the way 'El' did. He wasn't practiced at saying it the same yet.

She nodded and turned to Dustin, "Sorry, Dustin." He waved her off. "Lunch?" she asked brightly of Mike. A grin swept over his face and he took her hand leading her toward the cafeteria.

The lunch room was like nothing El had ever seen. It was packed with kids her age and younger, with resounding laughter, bickering and just a constant hum of noise. It was, in one word, overwhelming. Her hand tightened around Mike's for a minute. The party made their way to their designated table, a low cracked bench and wobbling table top scribbled on and chipped. El set her lunch box on the table and they settled in.

"Mike, where's your lunch?" Will asked. El looked concerned and rattled herself for not noticing sooner.

"I forgot it at home. It's fine you guys, I'll eat when I get back," Mike waved it off and turned his head to meet El's gaze. She unpacked her lunch and pulled out half of her sandwich handing it to Mike. At this, everyone else parsed out pieces of their lunch for Mike. He was trying to push it away, protesting that he wasn't even hungry when out over the intercom a voice blared:

"MIKE WHEELER TO THE FRONT OFFICE. MICHAEL WHEELER. FRONT OFFICE PLEASE." Mike looked up toward the intercom in

confusion.

"I'll be right back," he touched El's shoulder and jogged off toward the open doors leading out to hall. El watched him go for a minute and turned back to her lunch. She and Max were discussing their excitement for next period (art!) when from behind, El was bumped. It wasn't even accidental, she was bumped so hard that she was pushed into the table her top half curling over the table top. She turned around quickly in her seat.

"Oops," the same blonde hair, blue eyed girl from Social studies stared back at her. El's eyes narrowed a little before stating, not making eye contact: "It's fine."

The girl erupted into a peal of laughter as her friend leaned in whispering something in her ear and staring pointedly at El. "I KNOW!" she laughed nodding toward El before turning on her heel and moving across the cafeteria followed by a gaggle of tittering teenagers.

"Who was that?" Max asked, concerned. El shrugged. And then, on a second thought turned to Max and under her breath said:

"Don't tell Mike." Max looked at her with a flash of concern and glanced back to the retreating girls. She didn't have a good feeling about this. She'd been the new girl once and had only escaped their teasing because of the crazy, hectic rumors surrounding her brother. El turned back to her lunch and began eating and joining in on the conversation. Will gave Max a worried glance, having quietly witnessed the entire interaction. But when Mike returned, his mom-delivered lunch box in hand, El was laughing and joking with Dustin and Lucas about Dustin's obsession with Dig Dug. Mike was thrilled to see her so wrapped up in his life with his friends and school. It was everything he'd hoped it would be.

Before the bell dismissing them from lunch rang, the group had already planned an excursion to the arcade later that week, homework permitting, and a potential sleepover the following weekend for Dustin's birthday.

Before shuffling off to art class with everyone, Mike pulled El back a

little behind the rest of the group and laid a quick peck on her cheek, overcome with excitement, "I'm happy you're here."

She smiled up at him, wrapping both her arms around his middle, smooshing her face into the crook of his neck and walking awkwardly sideways. He reciprocated by wrapping his arm up around her shoulders, pulling her in tighter, their feet knocking into each other as they walked.

"Me too."

4. Chapter 4: September 1point75, 1985

A/N: Happy holidays! This is the last chapter that will include a full day that I'll do in this immense amount of detail. Enjoy.

Chapter 4: September 1.75, 1985 6th Period, Gym

Fifth period was spent twirling back and forth on metal stools in the sun swept art room. Dustin and Lucas kicked each other as they whipped back and forth. Mike leaned on his elbow across the wooden art table, peering around El at the front of the room where their art teacher Mrs. Dooley was holding a piece of pottery and explaining their first project. Mike distractedly touched El's back with his index finger, tracing circles in the middle of her spine. El swung her feet delightedly from atop her stool and glanced happily at Will who was beaming and bouncing his foot on the highest rung. Max chewed a piece of gum and absent-mindedly wrapped a finger around her fire red hair.

Mrs. Dooley slapped a piece of damp clay in front of each of them and told them to get to work. Dustin proceeded to smack his fist as hard as he could into the top of the clay producing a loud THWAP.

"Mr. Henderson, please refrain from punching your clay. We don't want a repeat of last semester do we?" Mrs. Dooley asked, eyes narrowed. At this, Lucas proceeded to stab the flattened mound of clay that was Dustin's potential masterpiece.

After art, the gang nearly tumbled out of the door, excitement building as the end of the day felt near. Max once again took El's arm into hers and pulled her down an opposite hall towards the gymnasium. El waved a contented goodbye to the party, feeling more comfortable this time at being separated. Dustin had showed her that biology on their own was fun, why wouldn't gym be just as fun?

On the way to the gymnasium, Max and El discussed and laughed about a comic Max had recently lent El called Vampirella. By far, it was the most ridiculously dressed superheroine they had unearthed from the comic shop. Max led El into the girl's locker room where they stowed their bags. Their gym teacher rounded the corner with a

clipboard and started distributing their gym uniforms: "Keep these clean, I swear to god if I get one more girl coming to me complaining about 'feminine B.O.' I'm going to rip my nose off."

El's eyes went wide and Max stifled a laugh behind wide eyes. While they changed, El noticed the same group of girls from the lunch room who had knocked into her. She sucked in a sharp breath and averted her eyes quickly before they noticed her.

"You ready?" Max's hands were on her hips, gym shirt untucked and loose. El nodded, tucking in her gym shirt. As they passed the group of girls from the lunch room, El heard one of them whisper something. She couldn't help glancing over when she thought she heard her name. She made eye contact with the same blonde who gave her an even worse glare than before. El snapped her head forward and walked into the wide open gym.

They started the class by running circuit sprints across the gym floor, tagging off each time with a partner. El enjoyed the movement and she and Max made a good team. After sprints the p.e. teacher broke them up into two teams and, with the help of some of the other students, erected a net across the gym floor. After the rules were explained and positions were assigned, everyone shuffled into place. A bright white volleyball was handed to a taller brown haired boy on El's side of the net. He pitched it up and smacked it with the palm of his hand to the other side of the net dramatically. El watched it sail over her head to the other side where the other team began shifting nervously to receive it. It fell past a small girl's V'ed arms and bounced across the floor. A titter of laughter swept through the gym.

"Alright, alright, try again!" yelled the coach. After a half hour of playing, they actually weren't doing too bad. Most of the kids were able to hit the ball and launch it over the net with success. El even made contact with the ball at one point and was able to lightly spike it down over the net like the coach had instructed. It came down with minimal force but with enough speed to startle the blonde haired glaring girl. "Sorry!" El chirped genuinely.

"Whatever." She nearly spat, embarrassed as laughter rang up from around the gym. Her face turned bright red and she shot another death glare toward El.

When the coach had rotated them through positions, she pulled different members onto different teams. Max and El were placed on separate teams and standing directly to El's right was the glaring girl. El gave her a sympathetic smile and to her surprise, the girl smiled back, but somehow her eyes didn't change from their glare. El blew out a breath and hunched over, ready for the next play. After a few tosses back and forth, cries from the kids to get-it-get-it-get-it, a swift spike was launched toward the glaring girl. She channeled the force of the spike and smacked the ball sideways. Before El had any time to react, the ball punched directly into the right side of her face with such force that she stumbled sideways and instantly became dizzy.

Max watched horrified as El stumbled to the gym floor from the hit and clutched the right side of her face. She didn't cry out, but a soft and forceful "Ow!" escaped her lips as tears uncontrollably welled in her eyes.

"Alright alright alright. Take it back a step." The gym teacher hurried over to El and helped her up. The glaring girl held a hand over her mouth to keep her laughter from ringing out across the gym, but she wasn't necessarily trying to hide it. Max ducked under the net and rushed to El's side:

"Oh my god?! Are you okay?" El gave a quick nod and was helped over to the bleachers.

"Ms. Hargrove, run to the nurses office and get an ice pack please," the P.E. teacher said bending at the waist and resting her hands on the top of her knees to be eye level with El.

Max bolted before giving El the 'stay here' look they all had mastered over the summer.

"How yah feeling?" she asked. El touched her bright red, scraped cheek tentatively. "oooh, don't touch it, we need to get some ice on it. The redness should go down but you might have a bit of a scrape on your face. Do you feel dizzy? Hot?" She lifted the back of her hand to El's forehead. El shook her head and managed to say softly: "I'm fine."

"Okay, sit the rest of this one out and keep the ice on it." El nodded as Max busted back through the gymnasium doors holding a bag of ice

wrapped around what looked like a dish towel. El held the ice pack to her cheek for the rest of the period watching with mild embarrassment as kids kept looking back at her throughout the rest of the game. Some would laugh, others would look at her concerned or with narrowed eyes. She tried to keep her gaze downward so she wouldn't be tempted to decipher their stares anymore.

After they were released from the gymnasium, El and Max quickly changed. El dropped the ice pack on the bench in the locker room and pulled her backpack over her shoulder quickly, making a beeline for the exit.

"Wait! Jane!" Max cried picking up the ice pack and chasing after her, "You need this." When they reached the door of the locker room, El spun around and shook her head, a sharp and serious look coloring her face. "No."

"Oh..okay," Max said a little taken aback. She tossed the mostly melted ice in the trash and left the dish towel on top of the can before exiting together. Both girls were silent walking the length of the hallway back to their respective lockers, but that didn't stop Max from leaning forward with her hands in her pocket to try and catch a glance from El. But El kept her gaze trained to her white sneakers, trying to quiet the rise of embarrassment and upset that had roiled in her stomach throughout 6th period.

Back at the lockers, El gathered what she needed for the evening and left down the hall with Max to the double doors leading out to the front of the school. The final bell rang just as they opened the doors with a crash. The boys wouldn't be far behind so they walked to the bike racks to wait for them.

"Jane?" Max grabbed her shoulder, "Are you okay though? For real?"

El paused before answering her, looking off to the side where she saw the boys making their way down the stairs. With a bright, plastered on smile she looked at Max, "I'm fine! Really. Please, don't make a big deal about this okay? It was an accident."

"But—," Max began, but the boys were already upon them.

"We DID IT!" Lucas cried, pretending to collapse across his bike from exhaustion. "Day one. We survived."

"Give me a demadog anyway, am I right guys?" Dustin quipped. Mike came around the group and up to El, Max finally moved away from in front of her, a worried look still etched on her face. El followed her with her eyes as she stepped off to the side before looking up at Mike.

"Hey! How was the rest of..." an audible gasp escaped his throat as his hand shot up to her cheek, "Oh my god what happened?!" He dropped his backpack off of his shoulder and brought his other hand to softly cup the unaffected cheek as well. He gently moved her head to the side to get a better look at the round pink mark on her cheek with some light, but noticeable scratches. His eyes squinted in noticeable pain when he ran a thumb over her cheek and she winced nearly imperceptibly; the spot was still a little hot and sore to the touch. When El didn't answer right away, Mike looked over his shoulder at Max.

"WHAT happened?!" He said a little too forcefully. El brought her hands to Mike's wrists and pulled them down off of her face.

"It was an accident. A volleyball." El explained matter-of-factly at Mike who shot his gaze back to meet hers when she piped up.

"A volleyball?" he asked, his face scrunching in confusion.

"Like to the face?!" Dustin croaked. El nodded, her other cheek reddening in embarrassment. Max had crossed her arms over her chest and kicked some dirt around her feet avoiding the stares of the party members.

"Was it you?" Will asked a little uncertainly of Max. Her head snapped up and her eyes went wide.

"WHAT?! NO! OF COURSE NOT! IT WAS THIS BLONDE-HAIRED JERK FACE WHO—," but Max was cut off.

"Who accidentally hit the ball weird and bounced into the side of my face. It's no. big. *Deal*." She stressed the word 'deal' and looked carefully at Mike, making sure not to let any significant emotion rise

in her face so as not to alarm him further.

"Are you okay?" he asked, tilting his head to look at her cheek a little better, his hands firmly held in hers.

"Yes."

"You promise?" he stooped a little so his eyes were level with hers.

"I promise," she responded a little too quickly. The corner of Mike's mouth turned down in a worried grimace, not quite believing her.

"Okay," he surrendered. He looped an arm around the top of her shoulders and pulled her into his chest. Her hands found his back and gripped there. She was fine. A sharp honk roused them from their embrace. El pulled back quickly to look over her shoulder. Hopper was there, passenger window rolled down, waving and peering over his shades.

"Gotta go!" El breathed turning back to Mike. His face fell enough in obvious disappointment that it made her laugh a little and reached up to kiss his cheek. He noticeably blushed and nodded.

"I'll call you later, okay?" She nodded back and waved to others, giving Max a longer, pleading stare before she took off, jogging, backpack bouncing and empty lunchbox in tow, to the truck.

Once she climbed in the truck, all smiles, she leaned out the window and waved to the party as they mounted their bikes. Max held onto the back of Lucas's seat to pull her along on her skateboard. When she turned to Hopper and smiled, she could see signs of relief flooding his face for just a moment.

"So? How was it?" he asked as he put the truck into drive. Just as she opened her mouth to begin telling him he stopped her, "Hey, woah, what happened?!"

El audibly groaned and stared out the windshield, "Ugh, nothing! It's fine. I got hit in the head with a volleyball in P.E. It's fine. I'm fine."

When only silence filled the cab, she looked over. Hopper was laughing under his breath, leaning into his driver side window and

trying to conceal it.

"Heeey!" she protested, "It's not funny!"

An audible laugh erupted, shaking his torso. "It's a little funny kid. You mean to tell me," laughter boomed in the cab now, "That you can close a portal to another dimension, but you can't dodge a ball to the face?!" Tears were escaping his eyes. El crossed her arms.

"I'm glad you're enjoying this. It still hurts by the way!" She pouted.

"Okay, I'm sorry kid," he wiped his eyes and let out a few more light laughs before clearing his throat, "How about some ice cream to celebrate your first day and gym experience?"

El's eyes lit up and she turned to him, nodding eagerly. She'd take a ball to the head everyday if it meant getting ice cream with Hopper. He swung around the loop in town and pulled into the Norman's ice cream parlor.

Once they exited the truck, Hopper put an arm down around her shoulders and pulled her into his side, his hand resting affectionately on top of her curly head.

"So besides, the volleyball incident, how was it?"

She looked up at him beaming: "Amazing. Really."

5. Chapter 5: September 16, 1985

A/N: Hi! I hope everyone had a nice holiday. Keep a lookout for Chapter 6, it should be up shortly. Feedback is always appreciated.

Chapter 5: September 16, 1985 Curfew

The first couple of weeks of school had passed by in a blur. El was thriving and throwing herself into every subject. She was struggling only a little thanks to the boy's and Max's tutoring the year before but it still took her extra time to finish her homework.

Much like the summer before school started, El started to bloom. She found herself laughing always, talking so much more, not just about DnD or comic books, but about school work, biology, history, even the other students she encountered at Hawkins Middle. Hopper was thrilled about this change. She opened up like a floodgate at the dinner table and could barely even finish her dinner she was talking so much. He drank it in and was just happy to see her fitting in so well into school life.

Despite the changes and confidence El had begun to gain after the first couple of weeks of school, her curfew and rules stayed firmly in place. She had to beg Hopper to hang out at Mike's on a school night to do homework and even then, Hopper picked her up so early. When she protested, he always said the same thing:

"You know the rules, kid. We're not out of the woods yet." She would glare at him briefly from across the dinner table before retorting with:

"Where's the fun if there isn't a little risk involved?" Hopper would always raise his eyebrows at her and ask her to repeat herself. She never did. But she was getting antsy again.

A little bit of freedom has a way of weaseling its way inside of you and it inevitably grows. She wanted more. She wanted to go to the movies with Mike; she wanted to bike to the arcade with the party; she wanted to draw and listen to music with Will in the park; she wanted to sleepover at Max's; and she wanted to go on adventures

with Lucas in the quiet forest behind his house. But Hopper claimed it was all too risky.

She didn't understand the difference between going out now and going out next spring. It would still be just as dangerous in Hopper's mind. This led her to believe that Hopper wasn't going to lift the curfew or get rid of the rules even in the spring. She began to boil.

Most of her nights were spent at her white desk in her bedroom. Will and Joyce had helped her paint pink and yellow flowers all over its surface over the summer. She traced them with her finger now, her biology text book lying flat and open in front of her.

Lost in thought, her eyes darted over to the Supercomm on her bed. It crackled quietly every so often. She walked over to her bed and plopped down, extending the antenna with a sharp snap. She turned to channel 11 and coded for Mike.

The static was deafening as she waited for Mike to respond. Maybe he was sleeping. El glanced at the clock on her nightstand: nine three five. She tried again, pushing the button emphatically. A groggy sound crackled through the speaker.

"El?" a sleepy, quiet Mike responded. El's eyes widened in excitement, the way they always did when he said her name.

"Mike, are you sleeping? Over."

"No, no, not anymore. What's going on? Are you okay? Over."

El took a deep breath.

"I'm fine, I'm just..." the static seemed to crackle endlessly while El decided whether or not to tell Mike about how she was feeling. She should be grateful really with how much she's been able to do this year already, but that single taste of freedom opened up something in her and now she couldn't put it out of her mind.

It was easy last year in the cabin. Well not easy exactly, but physically being separated and not knowing what her life could be, it was easy to put that eagerness off. But now, it beat inside her like a heavy drum, vibrating her entire body.

"El? Are you there? Over." Mike's voiced pitched a little with worry. El sighed and shook her head.

"No, it's nothing, Mike, I'm sorry. I-I was just having some trouble with my biology homework but I think I actually figured it out. I'm sorry I woke you. Over."

There was a definite pause before Mike responded. Could he read that tone in her voice? That tone that meant she was hiding something?

"Okay. You sure you're okay? Over."

"I'm sure. Sorry. Over and out."

"Okay, it's okay. Over and out."

She set the Supercomm back on her bed and closed her eyes tightly. Why hadn't she told him? She had wanted to so bad, but something held her back. As much as Mike said he liked spending time with her and being with her, and she knew he did, she also knew that he would do anything to keep her safe. Keeping her safe meant obeying Hopper's rules. Telling him that she was considering breaking those rules would not have gone over well. He might have tried to stop her. Or worse, he might tell Hopper.

If she was going to do something reckless, she was going to do it on her own. She was going to prove to Hopper that whatever risk he thought existed, she could handle it. With that, she switched off her bedside lamp and crawled into bed, flipping the Supercomm on and off and falling asleep to the cool static.

El woke up exceptionally early for a Saturday morning. The sun was barely coming up as she trudged into the kitchen after a fitful night of sleep. It was Saturday, which meant surely she could go hang out with her friends all day, but El had even more in mind.

After popping some eggos in the toaster and pouring herself a glass of orange juice, she stared out the kitchen window across the lake. Light was pouring in from all sides, burning the mist away slowly. The ducks began ruffling their feathers and preening, welcoming the

warmth of the sun.

Halfway through her breakfast, Hopper wandered into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and making a beeline for the coffee pot. As he filled the filter with coffee grounds, he ducked his head under the cabinets to look at El. She was quiet this morning, more quiet than she had been these past couple of weeks, but Hopper decided not to make a thing out of it.

"What do you got going on today, kid? You gonna go see Wheeler and work on that bio homework?" Hopper offered. "I can give you a ride around nine." He said matter-of-factly. She decided to take a shot in the dark, knowing what the answer was before she even asked it, but still...

"I was thinking I could bike to Mike's today," El didn't take her eyes off of her eggo. "I can use the back roads and ride in the treeline. Lucas showed me last summer." Hopper rubbed his eyes.

"Kid, you know the rules. No biking."

"Okay," she surrendered quickly. Hopper glanced over, surprised.

"Okay? That's it? No lecture?" He pulled the coffee pot off the warmer before it even finished brewing, sending the dripping coffee into a hissing spit.

"Yes. Just okay. I got it." She walked her plate and cup back to the sink and began washing them off. She gave him a half-hearted smile before turning down the hall towards the bathroom to shower.

Had he just experienced first hand the cold, unfeeling slap of teenage angst? Hopper lifted a hand to his cheek just to be sure.

Around nine, Hopper pulled his cruiser up to the Wheeler residence. El slung her backpack on her back and looked over at Hopper, that same quiet, cold falling from her mouth.

"Thanks, I'll see you at seven." He pursed his lips and nodded. Just as she was about to jump down the from the cab, he reached across and lightly grabbed her arm.

"Wait! Kid...is-is everything okay?" El turned to face him. Her heart hammered in her chest. She wasn't sure why, but she was nervous. She thought maybe he had caught on to her plan, that she was getting too easy to read.

"Yes, I'm fine. What do you mean?" She asked tentatively, trying to calm her breath.

"Nothing, you just...seem a little quiet today. I just... is everything okay with...with you and Mike?" El's eyes widened in surprise. Hopper all but flinched. He did not want to be asking that question, but he knew the Wheeler kid had something to do with this. He always had an effect on her mood. It was the only thing he could think of.

"Mike?" El breathed surprised and almost laughed.

"Yeah...he's not like...pressuring you to do anything right? You both are still just friends, right?" With each word Hopper cringed, his hand still lightly on her arm.

"I don't know what you mean..." she knew exactly what he meant. She and Mike were definitely not just friends, but Hopper was getting at something she'd only seen alluded to on the soap operas she'd watched.

"Just...I just want to make sure everything is okay...with you and h-him." Why had he started this conversation again? He internally groaned.

"Yes, everything's fine. We're friends. Promise. Can I go?" her breath hitched in her throat when he nodded and released her. She jumped from the cab and sprinted not towards the front door but around the back to the basement floor entrance. Hopper watched her disappear behind the house and knocked his hand on the steering wheel. Nothing could have been more awkward in that moment.

Closing the door behind her, El tried to replay the conversation she had had with Hopper in her head. Why was he so worried about her and Mike? That was definitely not the way she had expected that conversation to go. She turned around to see Mike fiddling with a

rubix cube on the couch. He glanced at her and smiled.

"Hey! The guys should be here shortly. Max is upstairs talking to Nancy about I don't know what. Come sit!" He patted the seat next to him. She sunk onto the couch and took her backpack off. He put down his rubix cube and gestured to the backpack.

"Did you need some help with biology still?" He leaned over and grabbed her backpack. With every passing second, she watched him closely. He did everything possible to help her in every way. He had to help her with this now. But she couldn't tell him yet. She nodded and they set to work on some questions she was struggling with until the other party members arrived.

The day was spent in the Wheeler basement playing board games and watching movies. They broke for lunch and Max and Lucas ran out to get ice cream for everyone. Dustin, Will and Mike stayed behind with Eleven. El could feel the old frustration building in her again. She could just go now, but she was going to wait. There was no point in setting them off early and getting in trouble before the day was done.

After ice cream, they laid around and did some homework, Will drew his new character for an upcoming DnD campaign and Dustin and Lucas started outlining a timeline for their upcoming science fair project. Max flipped through a comic book providing input on their ideas when she felt like they were moving off track.

Mike settled in next to El. She was bent over her history textbook, scribbling out some notes.

"Hey," he poked her gently. She looked up at him and smiled gently. "You okay? You've been kind of quiet today. And last night...last night it seemed like you wanted to talk about something." Mike leaned a little closer to her in hopes of keeping their conversation quiet and between them.

"I'm fine. It's just..." she needed to divert the conversation somehow. She knew she wouldn't be able to lie to Mike face to face. She wouldn't be able to hold back what she was planning. "Hopper...he asked me about you and I today before I came over. He thought something might be wrong. He asked if you were..if you were," she

looked Mike directly in the eye. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw how his eyes glittered when he looked at her. His mouth was pulled up in a soft smile. Being this close, she was sure he could hear her heart hammering in her chest, "He asked if you were pressuring me." The smile evaporated from his face into a disgusted grimace.

"What?!" The other party members glanced over at Mike's sudden outburst. "How could he even think...I would NEVER...What a piece of...Uggggh," flustered, Mike stood and paced the length of the couch. "El, I would never do anything to pressure you, okay? You have to tell him that. I would *never* ever—"

"Mike!" He stopped pacing and stared at her, his mouth slightly open. "I know, I told him, don't worry." He kneeled down in front of her.

"You know that too, though right? If you ever feel like I'm pressuring you, you have to tell me. Promise?" His eyes were wide and desperate. The thought of hurting her or making her do anything she was uncomfortable with made him ache.

"I will. I promise." She placed a hand on his cheek and smiled reassuringly. He smiled back and resumed his place on the couch with her.

"Ya'll are weird." Lucas called from the other side of the room.

"Shut up." Mike quipped without looking away from El.

Seven o'clock came too quickly. El was just beginning to open up again after her unnatural (at least recently) silence wore off with the excitement and energy she always felt infused into her when spending time with her friends. While they were all still sat at the table and packing up their things, El took a chance.

"So what are you all doing tonight?" El knew that they had to have something planned for tonight. It was Saturday after all. They usually hit the arcade or a movie or something. She was banking on this. El watched as they all glanced nervously around at one another, finally resting all of their gazes on Mike. El followed their gazes and watched as Mike shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Uhhhh, we were probably going to go see a movie..." No one would look at her. They hated sharing plans that they knew she couldn't attend because of her curfew. They didn't want to seem like they were rubbing it in her face. El watched as they all avoided her gaze. She looked back at Mike who looked devastated, "I'm sorry El, we know you can't go it's just —."

"What movie?" El said calmly. Mike's eyebrows arched curiously. The rest of the party looked at her.

"Uh, Back to the Future at 8pm. Can you come?" Mike asked, his brows furrowed again and he looked at her strangely.

El shook her head, but smiled. "That's okay. Tell me all about it though, okay?"

"For sure!" "Absolutely!" "You bet!" they each said. Mrs. Wheeler's voice called from the top of the stairs:

"Jane! Your dad is here!" El jumped from her chair and walked around to hug Mike. She gave him a perfunctory goodbye and began to stomp up the stairs slinging her backpack on her shoulder. Mike stood hastily and took two long steps to reach the bottom of the stairs from his place at the table.

"El!" he called up to her, but she reached the top and walked briskly out of the basement, pretending not to hear him. He heard the front door shut and knew she had gone.

"What was that about?" Max asked. The rest of the party sat in silence. Mike placed a hand in his pocket and pursed his lips.

"I don't know. That was weird right?" He turned to the rest of the group and they nodded briefly. His eyes wandered back up the length of the stairs. Something was wrong.

Back at the double wide, El changed quickly from her casual day clothes into a cute, short jean skirt that had rainbow butterfly buttons up the front. Nancy had picked out some new clothes without the supervision of Hopper late last summer and given her things to choose from. She wanted to let El know that she didn't have to dress

in flannels and jeans the rest of her life. El put on a light pink long-sleeved sweater that was looser in the arms and tighter around her torso. The fabric was soft on her skin and she admired herself in the mirror. A knock came at her door. She hurriedly put on her bathrobe and jumped into bed, pretending to draw something in one of her notebooks haphazardly strewn on her bed. Hopper peaked his head in.

"You okay kid?" She nodded nonchalantly from her bed. "Okay, I gotta run out to the station really quickly on a call. You gonna be okay here or do you want to come with?"

El shook her head, "I'll be fine!" *Perfect!* She thought to herself. This couldn't have gone any better.

"Keep the doors locked, okay? I'll be back in no time."

"Okay!" she chirped. She glanced quickly at her bedside clock: seven three zero. If she hurried, she could make it to the theater in time and surprise the party.

"Love you kiddo." Hopper smiled. El smiled back a little sad. She knew she was going to get into trouble, but she felt like she had to do this. She had travelled to another state and found her sister in an abandoned warehouse and had done way worse things that he didn't know about. Surely, she could pull off a night out at the movies with her friends. He would be worried, for sure, but maybe once he saw that she was safe, he'd change his mind. *Maybe.*

She waited until she heard his cruiser crunch off down the gravel drive before she flew out of bed, shoved her white converse on and dotted her lips with her bright cherry lip gloss (another gift from Nancy). She locked her bedroom door and set her record player on her vinyl of Blondie. She let it play quietly, turned off her light and clambered out her bedroom window.

Once in her backyard, she hurried over to the locked shed where her bike was stored. With a flick of her head, the lock broke and she pulled the chain away. She mounted her bike and with one last glance behind her, she set off down the road toward downtown Hawkins. The wild cool night pulled through her curls. She released a

loud, brilliant sigh and lifted her head to the night sky. The drumming inside of her built to a crescendo and she was positively thrumming with adrenaline.

She was doing it. She was free. The lights of town quickly came into view and El stood up on the pedals and pumped hard, pink rushing to her cheeks as her blood pumped excitedly through her veins. For tonight, she would be normal. Consequences be damned. If anything, she'd prove to Hopper that she could handle this and that the danger was minimal, if not non-existent.

The movie theater came into view and El released an excited breath. Just over the heads of other kids milling around outside of the theater she spotted him. Mike. Her Mike. Laughing in the glow of the bright lights of the marquee. She skidded to a halt and pushed her bike into a nearby bike rack. She smoothed out of her skirt and ran a hand over her windblown curls before jogging excitedly toward the party.

Max caught sight of her first.

"What the hell." Max uttered, her eyes wide at El's approaching figure.

"What?" Mike turned from Max and scanned the crowd. His gaze fell on El, traipsing toward him, sheer joy on her face.

El from afar could see the look of panic and worry crossing over Mike's face and she hesitated. Was he not happy to see her? Her smile dropped a little as she scanned the faces of the stunned party. She felt so light and airy, why were they all so dark and heavy?

With a determined breath, El walked the last few steps to meet them and breathed a happy sigh, staring straight at Mike.

"Hi! Turns out...I could come after all."

6. Chapter 6: September 16, 1985

Chapter 6: September 16, 1985 Saturday Night at the Movies

He was so confused, blinking down at her, but he couldn't help an excited breath escaping his lips as he looked at her. She looked beautiful. The lights on the marquee made her dark eyes glitter and surrounded her curls in a halo of gold. Her legs were bare and extended long past the short length of her skirt. He had placed his hands unconsciously on her upper arms when she approached him and the fabric was soft and fuzzy under his hands.

The soft smell of vanilla wafted from her curls with a hint of cherry proceeding from her reddened lips. He recalled that hot July day of her sucking on a bright red popsicle. The color had seeped into her lips and made her pout especially appealing to him. This gloss had the same effect and caught the glitter of the light above.

She gave him an eager, overwhelming, heart wrenching smile.

"What are you doing here?! Did the chief drop you off?" He finally found his voice after taking her in and pulled her a little closer. Suddenly the throng of eager middle schoolers around him felt crushing. She was out in the open and not just at school, but out for anyone to see. This was definitely a risk. His heart pounded and she placed a hand on his chest, trying to steady him.

"No, I...I biked here."

"You what?!" Dustin, Will, and Lucas echoed together. Max had a hand over her eyes. El looked around worriedly at them. What if they took her back right away? She had to convince them. She had to lie. But she wasn't any good at it and with Mike standing in front of her, she'd choke.

"El—er—Jane? Does the chief know you're here?" Mike asked, fixing his gaze on her firmly. She steadied her gaze, willed herself to be convincing and nodded her head.

"Yes. He said we c-could try." She was actually impressed with

herself. She had held his gaze and only stumbled a little bit. Her hands felt warm in his and they were starting to sweat. She quickly put them in the pockets of her jean skirt and took a step back from him. "Is it okay? That I came?"

El glanced around at the others, they were stunned, waiting for Mike to speak. Mike, not totally convinced bit the inside corner of his mouth. She wouldn't lie to him would she? But maybe she needed to. If the chief didn't know she was here, she was going to be in a heap of trouble and surely she wouldn't take such a big risk. She'd be grounded from now until eternity. She knew that. Right? All at once, Mike wasn't so sure El knew what being grounded meant.

"Of course it's okay that you came. But.. Jane, if Hopper doesn't know you're here, you're going to be in a lot of trouble. You're sure he said it was okay?" Mike asked worriedly. The last thing he wanted was for her to be taken from him. He'd gotten used to seeing her nearly every single day. The thought of her absence in his life again made him slightly crazy.

"I'm sure!" she nodded enthusiastically. He wouldn't send her away now, she knew that. But El didn't think he completely believed her. Whatever, she was here now, right?

"Okay. Hey Dustin, can you get Will's ticket so I can get one for Jane?" El hadn't thought about that. Money—it was still a new concept for her. She blushed for not remembering and mouthed a sorry at Mike as he clasped his hand over hers and pulled her into the line they were waiting in.

"Yeah, no problem man. This way, we all have dates." Dustin slung his arm over Will's short shoulders and pushed his face close to Will's. "Isn't that right schnookums?" Dustin made kissy noises in his ear prompting Will to laugh and swat at him.

"Finally found yourself a gay boyfriend eh Byers?!" Troy pushed past them, elbowing Will a little too hard.

"Isn't the point of a boy having a boyfriend already implicitly gay?" Dustin asked logically.

Troy cocked his fist in mock aggression at Dustin and grimaced disgustedly at Will. "Queer." He spat. Troy pushed his way toward the front of the line followed by two of his cronies who elbowed members of the party as they sauntered past. Mike pulled El farther behind him, blocking her mostly from view as Troy walked past. El peered around him watching Troy push his way to the front of the line and grab a ticket. El's eyes narrowed angrily and she turned her gaze back to Will who was looking dejectedly at his feet.

"Come on, dude, this movie is going to be awesome!" Dustin shook his shoulders and they moved forward with the line.

Once inside El looked around excitedly. Mike led her to the concession counter and ordered a popcorn for them to share and a soda. She held the bucket of bright yellow popcorn delightedly in her fingers while Mike took a sip of the soda and nodded toward the ticket checker. The party followed suit with their snacks.

They settled into the darkened theater watching the previews begin. El couldn't believe she was here. The giant screen before her was brilliant with color as she shoved handfuls of popcorn into her mouth. She heard a soft giggle beside her and tore her gaze away from the screen for a moment to look at Mike. He smiled at her and reached for her free hand. He leaned forward and kissed her softly, unexpectedly. He lingered there just above her lips for a minute before sitting back into his seat. The movie brightened into vivid color after the kiss sent her brain into fits of happiness.

She watched as Doc Brown and Marty McFly pushed the boundaries of the time and space in their Delorian and she felt more real than she had at any point since being released into Hawkins. No one was staring at her, no one was looking for her. Mike was beside her and her friends laughed along with the movie. She felt real and whole for the first time. She thought she might burst.

Once the credits rolled, El felt a slightly sinking feeling in her stomach. She knew now that the time was fastly approaching when she would have to confront the chief. A small part of her hoped so desperately that he had been held up at the station and hadn't made it home yet. Maybe she'd even make it back before him. The wish held little truth, she knew, but still a girl could dream. She threaded

her arm through Mike's and leaned her body into him tightly. Mike could feel the worry and anxiety washing off of her in waves.

She had lied. He knew that now for sure. She wasn't supposed to be out, yet here she was. He sighed sadly and leaned his head down to kiss the top of her curly head, giving her hand a light squeeze. The party was laughing and skipping into the lobby of the theater, reciting their favorite lines.

"I think I should bike home with you." Mike suggested. El shook her head firmly. There was no way that was going to happen. El knew what awaited her at home. Mike didn't need to see the extent of her decision.

"No. No Mike I can make it home. Really." She paused just outside of the theater doors. The marquee lights felt so much dimmer now. Mike screwed up his face in a worried grimace and shook his head, his soft curls bouncing against his temples.

"No. I'm going with you. You can't stop me." Well, she could, but she wasn't going to try. She surrendered and after feigning cheerful goodbyes to the rest of the party, she mounted her bike, Mike straddling his, and they took off down the main road.

After a short while of peddling in silence and once they broke out of the main part of Hawkins, the trees rising up around them and the road deserted, Mike turned his face toward her.

"El, how much trouble do you think you're in?" She didn't answer right away. She stood confidently on her bike and pushed one foot hard down on the pedal pulling just ahead of Mike and coasting down the last hill toward the double wide.

"I had to try, he was never going to let me leave. Not really." She whispered to no one but herself.

They quietly pulled up to the double wide. The kitchen light was on, Hopper's cruiser in the driveway. It was quiet. For a heartbeat, she thought she might be okay, but then she caught sight of Hopper through the window. A cigarette was clenched in his mouth and he stamped it out and hurried to the door when he saw her. She

dismounted her bike and let it fall beside her. She wasn't even going to bother hiding it, he already knew. The front door flew open and an angry Hopper stomped across the porch and down the stairs coming to a halt a few feet in front of her. His eyes shot to an alarmed Mike.

"Get lost Wheeler. You better say a goodbye now because you're not going to see her for awhile." Hopper's tone was an even growl. "Do I make myself clear?" he said through gritted teeth at Mike.

"It's not his fault." El managed. Hopper shot his gaze back at her taking a step forward.

"Did I ask who's *fault* this is?! No! You knew the rules, he knew the rules, and you **both** disregarded them. So as much as I don't care, and I really, really don't care, what either of you have to say about it, you're done."

"I know I should have brought her back Chief, I'm sorry, I just—," Mike launched into a hurried apology, his bike discarded next to him.

"Just nothing, Wheeler. I said get lost! You both put each other at risk! And for WHAT?! A bike ride?!"

"Movie." El breathed, her eyes turned down now.

"What?!"

"We went to see a movie. Nobody even looked at me." El's eyes were determined now and she looked up at an aghast Hopper.

"I don't CARE! *YOU KNEW THE RULES KID. YOU KNEW THEM AND YOU DECIDED TO LIE TO ME, SNEAK OUT, AND GO TO A MOVIE WITH MIKE. THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE!*" Hopper's voice boomed out across the open space in front of the double wide, alighting birds from the trees.

"Get inside, right *now*," the last word was barely audible, he was shaking he was so mad.

"Nobody saw me." El shot back, more adamant this time. Her eyes glimmered with anger too. She had to make him understand. "Nothing happened. And no one saw me. The rules don't make sense

if there is no risk and tonight showed there's no risk."

"Watch it kid..." Hopper pointed a finger at her taking a step toward her. "You're in enough trouble. You're grounded for two weeks. And we're going to have to decide if you can still handle school or not, because obviously you can't be trusted to follow basic rules, who knows what you're capable of unsupervised at the school. You might just take off again. Now get in the house before it's three weeks."

"Wait! You can't just yank her out of school for sneaking out, that's crazy!" Mike was next to El now, nearly standing in front of her, panic pulled across his face.

"You're going to take me out of school?!" El hadn't considered this. Her tone pitched from devastation to anger. Her fingers pulled into tiny fists and she glared at Hopper, the windows rattling with her rising anger.

"Wheeler I'm not gonna tell you again," Hopper's gaze was trained on Mike standing in front of him. He hadn't bargained for two teenage arguments tonight. They were at a standoff. Mike wouldn't budge, his face turned up toward Hopper's in a fitful scowl. The kid was getting close to eye level with him in his ever towering height.

"El," Hopper steadied his tone through gritted teeth, "Get inside. Now."

The rattling grew louder and the chief glanced around worriedly at the rising noise, but when his gaze returned to hers, it was clear, firm. A spot of blood ran from El's nose and she shut her eyes tightly. The tremoring windows quieted and she pushed past Mike with a broken sob, clattering up the front porch steps and slamming the screen door behind her. They both watched her go.

"You can't," Mike breathed, devastation coloring his tone. He was nearly begging. Hopper gave him one last exhausted look and then followed El up into the house, leaving Mike on the lawn, his chest rising and falling in growing panic, tears pricking at the corner of his eyes.

7. Chapter 7: September 18 and 19, 1985

AN: Short one today, but I wanted to build to some big things I have planned. Enjoy!

Chapter 7: September 18/19, 1985

The weekend was spent in silence and El tiptoed around whenever Hopper was in the house (which was the entire time). He refused to leave and was convinced she might take off again. Even though he was the chief of police, he wasn't thrilled about playing prison warden. He spent the nights away rubbing the worry from his face while cigarette smoke rose the stamped butts in the ashtray on the kitchen table. He didn't know what to do. He knew he couldn't keep her out of school, not now that she was doing so well and talking so much more. It was cruel and unusual punishment even for him.

He switched the dial on on her supercomm that he had confiscated the night she snuck out. That night was a messy haze of anger and fear. He'd come home exhausted after sitting through a complaint by Mrs. Marshal followed closely by a false alarm burglary. The soft sound of music radiated from her room. He hung his hat and took his belt that held his gun off and set it on the bench by their door. After grabbing a beer and taking a sip, he paused by the kitchen table. The house felt uncharacteristically empty, the music pouring from under her door was eerie. He could usually hear her at least faintly humming along or tapping the static on the supercomm or the shuffle of papers on her desk as she moved through her homework. But those familiar sounds that he had grown so accustomed to hearing and loving were absent.

"Hey kid," he called out. He took another sip of his beer and set it down gently on the table. "El!" he called a little louder this time. Silence, save for the warbling blonde from her record player. Hopper slowly approached her door, hand instinctively on his hip although he'd left his gun on the bench. He leaned on the door frame and knocked softly.

As he tried to turn the knob he was met, for once, with a locked door. He jiggled the handle "Hey kid, open up, we've talked about this. No

locked doors, remember?" He tried again and then stopped leaning an ear against the wood to listen for her shuffling feet or muffled voices or anything. His panic grew and he knocked again, louder this time:

"Kid, let me in or I'm going to break down this door." Nothing. "I'm going to count to five!" Sweat started to pool at his temples.

"One!"

What if something had happened?

"Two!"

What if someone was in there with her?

"I'm not kidding! Three!"

His shaking hands steadied for a moment: what if she had Mike in there? His panic evaporated into something greater. His face turned down into a scowl and he pushed a shoulder against the door, once, twice, three times and piece of the doorframe broke off. The door swung off of one of its hinges with a clatter and Hopper surveyed the empty, dark room. He checked the closet, under the bed, and then his eyes fell on the open window. And just beyond that, the open shed. He swallowed hard, his panic returning. She'd gone. Run away. From him. Fear and pain dropped into the pit of his stomach, something he hadn't quite felt since...Sarah.

That night was one of the worst for him since Eleven had come into his life. All of his fears and worry pooled around one continuous thought: that she had chosen to leave rather than being taken from him. He knew what that had felt like, this was something different though.

And then when he'd seen her roll up with Mike by her side, his heart returned. And then that fear turned to anger. He hadn't handled things well, but she didn't understand, couldn't understand what that had done to him. She couldn't understand what her risk entailed.

But he knew now he couldn't keep her from school. He stood up and walked to her room and leaned just inside the door frame. Her door leaned against the wall in the hallway—he'd have to fix that soon,

but remove the lock.

"Hey kid," he began, softly. Her frame was hunched over her desk, taking notes again, flipping through an open textbook, and paying him no mind. "Eleven, listen, I—."

"I'm going back. You can't stop me. It's not fair." She said matter-of-factly, sort of similar to the way Hopper listed things out to her when he wanted to be clear. A small smile pulled at his lips.

"I know, I wanted to talk to you about that," he walked into her room and sat on her bed. "Kid? Can you, can you look at me please? Just for a second." His face was softer now. His voice calm and endearing.

She put her pencil down and turned her dark brown eyes toward him. A frown lay plastered on her face, but she couldn't meet him with any other emotion at the moment.

"Listen, I think things got a little heated the other night and I wanted to apologize. What you did was," he lifted an eyebrow at her, "wrong. But, I don't think the punishment should be removing you from school. I want to come to a compromise, but you gotta meet me halfway kid."

Her eyes were considerably lighter and she nodded her head vigorously. School! She could have school! And Mike at school! And everyone else at school!

"Okay. So compromise: You're still grounded for two weeks. No supercomm, no going over to Mike's afterschool and no weekend visits. But," he let out a loud breath, "once the sentence is up, we can incorporate one special thing a week."

"Special thing?" El raised an eyebrow

"Yeah, kid like, going to a movie with Mike, or doing the science fair with Dustin or—."

"A sleepover? With Max?" El's eyes lit up. Hopper chuckled.

"Sure kid. Here or...or at her house. But here's the thing. One special thing a week means you pull no stunts." He held an index finger in

front of him, trying to be menacing.

"St-stunts." El squinted her eyes in confusion again.

"Yeah, that means, no sneaking out, no joy rides, no breaking anymore rules. I give a little, you give a little. Compromise. Remember?" El nodded her head so vigorously she thought her neck might snap. She rushed over to Hopper in a squeal and tackled him in a hug. He laughed and wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm just trying to keep you safe kid."

"I know. And," she leaned back meeting his eyes, "I'm sorry. I just wanted to know...To know what it was like."

"I know kid. And you're gonna get that more and more but you have to work with me."

She nodded, "Okay."

Mike stood next to the bike racks early Monday morning with his thumbs looped through the straps of his backpack nervously shaking his leg. He stared at the drop off area, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"Come on, come on, come on," he said under his breath.

"Mike!" Dustin, Lucas and Max pulled up to the bike racks. Mike whipped his head around for a second and then looked back out at the drop off area.

"She's not here yet?" Lucas asked. Mike didn't answer but pursed his lips in frustration.

"He wouldn't really keep her out of school, would he?" asked Max her tone dropping in worry.

"Don't worry, Mike. She's coming." Dustin gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. Mike's eyes shot over to his bike. He could just go over there and get her. Hopper couldn't keep her like this. She wasn't a princess to be locked away in a tower, but he would sure as hell be that guy who busted her out if he had to. He looked down at his feet

kicking at the dirt trying to decide if that would make things worse for El. He didn't want her to get in even more trouble.

"Mike look!" Dustin was standing next to him now a toothless smile pulling across his face. Mike looked up anxiously and saw the chief's truck pull up. The first bell rang for class and El jumped down from the cab, swinging the door shut and took off running, running. She gave a wave over her shoulder but her eyes stayed fixed on Mike as she sprinted down the short hill from the drop off. She flew into his arms, accidentally knocking Dustin back a little.

"El!" Mike cried, forgetting they were at school. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and tried to pull her in even closer. Her breath was hot on his ear and she was pulling in quick breaths from the excitement.

"You're here!" his lowered tone squeaked a little in his excitement.

"I'm here" she said back ecstatically. The two finally pulled apart, smiling at each other and El was passed to the rest of group, hugging with excited squeals of delight.

"How did you convince Hopper to let you come?" Will asked. He was thrilled to see her. After Mike had recounted what had happened at the double wide with tears freely falling from his eyes, Will was determined to try and help. He would convince his mom to go break down Hopper's door and pull Eleven out herself if he refused to let her leave. He knew Hopper wasn't unreasonable, just protective, but Mike had made it all sound so bleak.

El shrugged, "Compromise."

"Compromise?" Mike's eyes lit up. "What's the compromise?!"

"I'm still grounded for two weeks, but after that I can do one special thing a week. Sleepovers, or movies, or science fair, or anything!" Mike pulled her into a hug again lifting her up and spinning her around. He had no idea why Hopper had such a change of heart but this news sent him flying.

The final bell rang and they all looked panicked at one another.

They'd completely lost track of time in their excitement. They sprinted off to class, Mike's hand clasping El's firmly in his. Things couldn't get any better.

But, just as El charged up the steps with the others, she saw a flicker of face peering around the brick. Dark eyes, black sweeping hair. But before she could stop, they were through the doors and crashing down the hall, not bothering to stop at their lockers on the way.

It couldn't be, could it? *Kali*. El thought and her eyes widened in surprise.

8. Chapter 8: September 25, 1985

Chapter 8: September 25, 1985 Girl in the shadows

El fidgeted all throughout class that day and the rest of the week. She was constantly glancing toward the windows, watching for familiar faces in the tree line during lunch when it was nice enough to sit outside. When she'd scamper to the police cruiser after school, her eyes darted around peering out the passenger window for any sign of her. At night, in her room, she'd peer out her window across the dark lake. She'd even wandered out onto the porch in the middle of the night after being roused from a dream.

In the dream, Kali was there, reaching for her, calling her name, her eyes pleading. And El was being catapulted back farther and farther from her. But she wasn't reaching for Kali; her arms hung limp at her side, a trickle of blood fell from her nose and she was choking back sobs erupting from deep in her chest. She could only watch as Kali drifted farther and farther from her and she couldn't—or didn't—try to stop it.

El gripped the wooden railing of the porch and closed her eyes breathing in the late September air. When she felt warmth around her nose, she reached her hand up and felt that warm trickle of blood there. She pulled her hand back and examined the blood seeping into the lines of her fingers confusedly. Had she been using her powers or had she visited the void in her dreams? A crackle of leaves made El's gaze shoot to her left, a terrified gasp escaping her lips. Then a hand fell on her shoulder. She whirled around knocking her back against the railing.

"Woah, kid! It's just me," Hopper placated, eyes worried. "Are you okay? What are you doing out here?" El glanced around at the woods again where the sound had come from and then turned back to Hopper.

"Nothing, I—I couldn't sleep," she narrowly avoided his gaze trying not to pique his suspicion. She fidgeted a little in front of him but tried to keep her face calm, her tone even, like he taught her back in the cabin when they went over how to bluff your way out of a tricky

situation.

"You sure?" he raised an eyebrow, noticing how she clasped her hands together and how her fingers twitched ever so slightly. Something was definitely off.

"Yes," she smiled and nodded and moved back toward the house. El couldn't quite place what it was she was afraid of. Surely, she wasn't afraid of Kali—her sister. But something unsettled her. If Kali was here, why wouldn't she just come out and find her? Why was she hiding from her? And if she wasn't here, why was El seeing her? Hearing her? Dreaming about her? Was she in trouble?

El didn't feel comfortable telling anyone about Kali yet, not even Mike. Again, she wasn't entirely sure why that was. She told Mike everything. But this felt like a secret she needed to keep, even if just for a little bit longer.

She knew why she didn't tell Hopper though: that would mean confessing that her detour to Aunt Becky's last year also included an extended trip to Chicago. She knew he wouldn't be happy about that. So it was probably best to keep that and Kali to herself. But the problem was, she wasn't sure if she was going crazy or not and couldn't confide in anyone. This feeling of uncertainty was something she hadn't experienced since right after escaping the lab.

Back in her bed, El couldn't sleep. Every sound was Kali. Every shadow was her reaching out and looking for her. She woke constantly to the sound of her name being whispered in the darkness, sending chills down her spine and her heart racing. *Jane*.

When she wandered into the kitchen on Saturday morning, she could hardly keep her eyes open. El rested her head on her arms as Hopper shoveled eggs and toast onto her plate.

"You feeling okay kid?" Hopper leaned down a little to try and look at her flushed face while still holding the hot pan of eggs.

"Yes." El stated matter-of-factly again. Once again not making eye contact and sitting up to tuck into her eggs. Her eyes moved about the house, never resting on anything for too long. Hopper was

starting to get worried, but it was obvious she wasn't going to open up.

"Listen kid," Hopper took a seat in front of her at the table setting the pan on an oven mitt. "I have to go into the station today and I don't feel great about leaving you here alone." El's eyes shot up in alarm at Hopper. She didn't quite like the idea of being completely alone either just yet.

"So I was thinking," he continued, worry pulling at his face, "Maybe I could drop you off at Joyce's and you could spend the day with Will?"

El paused, her eyes never wavering from Hopper while she considered this. It was similar to those looks he remembered when he first took her in, when she was still mostly non-verbal. There was so much going on behind her eyes, but she would never vocalize it, afraid she might say something she shouldn't or maybe just being unable to. This regression was new though.

"Okay." She finally said and her eyes lowered to her plate again as she continued to eat. Hopper let out a dissatisfied sigh and got up from the table to retrieve more toast.

Later, while El was packing some school books and art supplies in her backpack, Hopper phoned Joyce.

"Hey, it's uh Hop." He firmly gripped a cigarette in his right hand.

"Hopper, so good to *finally* hear from you. What's up?" there was shuffling and laughter over the line and Hopper took a deep breath before continuing.

"Yeah, well a guys been busy so, listen. I need your help. Uh, I gotta go into the station today and El is still grounded. Can I drop her off at your place for the day? I know it's a lot to ask I just—,"

"Hop, please. That's nothing, of course she can come over here. Will and Jonathon are just playing on that damn Atari, so it'll be nice to have El come over and break that up a little."

"Okay great, and hey listen." He paused, not quite sure if what he wants to ask is even possible. "Listen I—" he turns his back away from

the hallway leading to El's room and lowers his tone, "El's acting kind of...skittish? I don't know, she's being really quiet and evasive and won't tell me what's going on. I don't know maybe she's just mad about being grounded, but I was wondering if maybe you could talk to her? See what's going on?" there was quiet on the other side of the line for a minute and Hopper held his breath, then suddenly, a little laughter broke across the receiver.

"Of course. I'm sure it's nothing. Teenage girls can get a little—uh," she didn't quite know what to say, having raised two boys so far.

Hopper let out a sigh of relief and turned around leaning back onto the countertop. But then he jumped. El was standing there looking at him by the kitchen table, her backpack on her shoulders, while chewing on a cold eggo.

"Th-thanks Joyce, we'll be over in a bit." He hung up hastily. "You ready to go kid?" She nodded and turned towards the door, waiting before opening it so he could exit first—another small rule. She walked over to the cruiser, keeping her gaze turned down and trying to quell the anxious feeling building in her stomach. That knowing sensation you get when you feel like you're being watched.

Pulling up the Byers house, El felt a warmth sweep through her. It felt calmer here for some reason and she was finally able to take deep full breaths without jumping at every single sound. The knot in her stomach loosened ever so slightly as she climbed down from the cab. She turned and gave a small reassuring smile to Hopper who smiled back:

"Call me if you need anything, okay kiddo?" she nodded in response and shut the door jogging up the Byers front door. It swung open enthusiastically by a delighted Will who had been watching at the window ever since his mom let him know El was heading over. He pulled her into a quick hug and grabbed her wrist gently to lead her into the house.

El couldn't help but smile at the scene before her. Joyce waved happily from the kitchen, scrubbing out some dishes still in her work uniform. Jonathon sat on the couch examining pieces of his camera he was attempting to clean. Will led her into his room and plopped

down on the bed. El realized suddenly that in all the time she spent with Will, she never had spent time with him on her own. And that warmth swept through her again. She smiled and let her backpack slide off her shoulder and bounced onto the bed with a laugh.

"I'm glad you're here!" Will beamed. "I just got a new set of markers... well they're from the thrift store but most of the colors aren't even dried out. We could draw or we could play the Atari. But Jonathon's kicked my butt for the last hour so I don't know if I can take another losing streak. Something tells me you're probably *really* good at games." His eyes flickered back and forth between her eyes and the comforter. His enthusiasm never wavered and for that she was grateful.

"Yes, let's draw!" El chirped and Will excitedly grabbed a stack of paper and they set to work with his new markers to craft their masterpiece.

An hour or so passed in comfortable silence, broken by laughter and exchanging drawings with one another. El hadn't felt this at ease all week. Something about Will connected in her—she felt drawn to him, in a way that was different with how she was drawn to Mike or Hopper or anyone else. It's as if Will knew exactly what she was all about without having to ask any questions. It was just comfortable being Will Byers' friend. She made a point to add extra friend time with just Will to her list of things she wanted to do when she was ungrounded and allowed one special thing a week.

Joyce gently knocked on Will's door and peaked her head in. "Hey guys, I have to run to the store really quick, but Jonathon is hanging in the living room if you need anything. I'll be back in about an hour. Any requests for lunch? Maybe Ponchos or McDonalds?" Her nose crinkled when she smiled. El tried to memorize the gesture.

"Really?! McDonalds?"

"Yep! My treat. It's a special day with El here." El smiled back. That warmth swept through her again.

"Awesome!" Will beamed at El. When Joyce had gone and they were quiet for a little while longer, El let her mind comfortably wander.

She thought about Will and Mike and Hopper. She thought about how different her life was now compared to just six months ago. She was filled with so much happiness. Her eyes lingered across Will's room and she stood up to examine some of his possessions. Will was still bent over his drawing as El walked slowly around his room, gently touching hand-me-down action figures, a couple of vinyl records, and the faded posters of bands she didn't know plastered on his wall. She picked up a familiar wizard figurine resting on his windowsill. It was the same figure she had pinpointed as his when he disappeared into the upside down. It felt like forever ago, but the tiny figurine still pulsed with an inexplicable warmth that she could only attribute to Will.

Outside, a figure pushed out ever so slightly from the tree line. El's gaze moved from the figurine to the black-haired, dark eyed girl. She dropped the wizard and rushed toward Will's bedroom door. Her panic grew as she bolted down the hall and out the back door through the kitchen. Jonathon was tucked away in his room, listening to music through his headphones.

Will had watched as El bolted from his room, calling after her while hastily pulling on his boots and vest. He chased after her out the back door and down the steps, watching as she disappeared into the treeline.

"El! Eleven! WAIT!" a small fear filled his eyes as he watched her disappear and a small sound escaped his throat as he ran after her.

El's feet crunched loudly and quickly as she pushed her way through the woods. Stray branches pulled at her thin sweater, her coat had been left behind in her hurry. She kept running toward where she felt Kali might be. She had seen her this time, she was sure of it. She wasn't crazy. Kali had looked right at her and then vanished. Why was she running from her?

Crashing through the forest, no sound but the dead leaves and the heavy breaths escaping her lips, El came to a clearing. There was no sound, no movement. She tried to quiet her breathing and cast her eyes around the clearing. Nothing. Her face scrunched up in frustration as she held back tears. Then she heard a distant cry.

"El! E-e-e-e-l!" Will came into the clearing, his hot breath fogging in the later September cold. "What happened?! Are you okay?" his eyes went wide as he walked up to her and put a soft hand on her shoulder.

"I—I thought I saw something," El's eyes still scan the surrounding forest. She had to be here. She had to.

"What?" Will asked incredulous. "El, what are you talking about? Are you okay?" he asked a little more emphatically, his hand gripping her other shoulder and standing in front of her. "El."

El snapped her head to stare at Will. His eyes were pleading, worried. She felt terrible for having worried him so much to chase after her. There was definite fear in his eyes. He was concerned and being in the forest made him a little uneasy after the events of last year. She couldn't hold back the well of emotion building in her. Tears stung at the corner of her eyes and soft sob broke from her lips. Will's eyes widened in surprise.

"Come on." He said leading her deeper into the forest. Just a few minutes walk away from the clearing Will led her to Castle Byers. He held back the fabric that acted as a door and they both climbed inside. "What's going on, El?" he asked so gently she whimpered a little trying to quiet her breathing.

"It's Kali." El finally managed after wiping away tears. Will looked at her confused.

"Kali? Who's—,"

"My sister," El whispered.

"Your sister?" again confused. El paused and looked around Castle Byers. It was somehow so comfortably warm in here. But then again, it was probably just Will. He carried warmth with him wherever he went. El took some deep breaths, steadied her gaze and launched into the story of last year, Chicago, and how she found Kali. The words kept tumbling out, spilling from her mouth like a runaway river. When she told him about seeing her now, dreaming about her, and not knowing if she was there or not, he reached out to rest his hand

over hers reassuringly.

"You're not crazy." He shook his head and his face remained even and serious. El bit her lip and let a few tears escape again.

"No?"

"No. I'm not sure why you're seeing her. Or even if she's here. But I know a thing or two about feeling crazy. Seeing things that aren't there. Things that shouldn't be there. You feel like you can't trust yourself anymore and that makes it worse. You could find her again though can't you? In—in the void?" He asked hesitantly. "Just to see if she was actually here in Hawkins or back in Chicago. You could check."

El hadn't considered this. She knew she could do this, but the thought hadn't occurred to her, mainly because she was afraid of what she might find. Would Kali still be okay? If she was in Hawkins and El found her, then what?

"I guess." El said, her face puffy and red. She hadn't realized but the light had faded around them outside of Castle Byers. It was starting to get difficult to see. She didn't know how long they had been here and the darkness surrounding them started to press in on her.

"Maybe you should. Just to see. Or at least to put your mind at ease at least." He nodded reassuringly.

El looked down at her hands for a moment. She still felt that familiar warmth and now a small bit of relief washed through her. She would find Kali. If she was here, El had to find out why. And if she wasn't, at least she could put her mind at rest. Maybe she could still reach out to her across the void and call Kali to her, like she had to Mike on Halloween last year. Maybe.

A booming sound rang out across the woods. Will and Eleven's eyes shot to the billowing curtain and ran out into the darkness. The sound was warbled and low, like a howl. Their eyes widened in brief fear until the sound began to take shape:

"EL-EV-EN! WI-II-LL!" More voices joined in. Some higher, some

lower and suddenly a cascade of flashlight beams could be seen coming over a crest in the hill backing Castle Byers.

"Is that? Mike?"

"And Hopper and your mom and *everyone*. Oh no." El looked frantically at Will. He returned her alarmed gaze and let out a soft '*shit*'. She had never heard him curse and the sound of it made her giggle.

"I'm so dead." El breathed.

"Come on," Will said and they took off up the hill to meet the barrage of voices calling out into the night. Reaching out for them across the dark.